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## Profile Interview With Pamela K. Sari

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# Who? What?

## PROFILE INTERVIEW WITH PAMELA K. SARI

Keslee Dilorio, *College of Liberal Arts*

### INTRODUCTION

Pamela K. Sari is a PhD candidate in American studies at Purdue University. She also is affiliated with the Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies (WGSS) Program and the Anthropology Department. Her research, teaching, and engagement interests relate to how individuals and communities navigate issues of "home" and "belonging." Her dissertation research examines a transnational connection between a Charismatic megachurch in central Java, Indonesia, and its American church partners, particularly Indonesian immigrant churches in southern California. Through her experience living in Indonesia and the United States where religious practices are prevalent, she is interested in the intersectionality between religion and other facets of identity.

### **Feminism and Religion: Critical Service-Learning Projects Between WGSS280 Students and Faith-Based Institutions in Greater Lafayette**

The idea for a service-learning course began when Sari began taking women's studies classes for a WGSS certificate. She was introduced to third world or postcolonial feminisms that speak to her international experiences. She was influenced by feminist anthropologists like Lila Abu-Lughod and Saba Mahmood whose writings examine practices of gender within/and religious communities. She began to see the need for dialogues between feminism and religion that examine the structures in place that contribute to the discrimination of women and minorities. At the same time, these dialogues need to consider the positionality and agency of women and minorities within and outside the religion.

The WGSS280 sections emphasize difficult dialogues between feminism and religion, and intersectionality with other elements of identity. Sari divided the class into three parts. The first part puts the spotlight on her as an instructor and weaver of concepts. The class begins by going through the history of women's movements in the United States. It discusses key concepts related to gender and sexuality, emphasizing intersectionality and a "matrix of dominance." The second part highlights the campus and community partners. We visited the Purdue Hillel, Islamic Center, and Purdue Christian Campus House to understand the religions in general, and more specifically, to learn about the voices of women in each religion. The third part of the class aims the spotlight on students as contributors in the learning process. Students are divided into five groups at the beginning of class and work on service-learning projects with faith-based institutions around Purdue campus.



Students discuss preparations for service-learning projects with their groups.

The community partners include the Muslim Neighbors Project, St. Thomas Aquinas, Chapel of the Good Shepherd, Purdue Hillel, and Generation: JUSTICE/Purdue Christian Campus House. Partners are chosen based on proximity to campus and their diversity of religious identities. The scope of each group's service-learning project is determined between the students and community partners.

The Muslim Neighbors Project group is interviewing Muslim American women and putting together a photo-narrative exhibition. The St. Thomas Aquinas group is conducting interviews and research on women's positionality with regards to marriage and family. They conduct interviews with nuns, single women, and married women in the church to understand the diversity of their roles as people of faith. The Chapel of the Good Shepherd group is analyzing the diversity and inclusivity of this Episcopalian church. The Purdue Hillel group is examining LGBTQ issues in Judaism, and another group is examining the role of women in Jewish holiday practices and celebrations. The Generation: JUSTICE/Purdue Christian Campus House group is participating in the activist campaigns against sex trafficking.

Sari explained the importance of connection in her course as a sort of webbing between coursework (pedagogy) and service-learning (engagement). She explains, "Every single assessment in my class is about connection with coursework. Students will not simply 'report' or 'reflect' on their service-learning experience. Depending on what the community partner needs and what students then must do, the groups will approach the project with a main thesis/question in mind (related to coursework)." For example, students who worked with Faith church last semester helped set up and tear down at their Mom-2-Mom events. Mom-2-Mom is a yearlong weekly meeting dedicated to discussing motherhood from a Christian perspective. Based on this task, students examined the intersectionality of religion and gender in Mom-2-Mom's teaching and practices of motherhood. Students also discussed whether—and if so, how—feminist ideas are discussed in the meetings.

### **Faith-Based Community Partners: Challenges and Opportunities**

When asked about barriers she faced when creating her service-learning course, Sari explained, "The beginning is always the hardest—this was my first course in WGSS and my first service-learning course. I spent practically all summer 2016 developing this course—both the pedagogical and the service-learning components.

Because I did not have a model in place, I had to seek a lot of advice. I am grateful to Lindsey Payne (Office of Engagement), Catherine Fraser Riehle (Purdue Library), and Sandi Caldrone (PURR), alongside Professors Venetria Patton and Susan Curtis, who asked me questions and gave me advice. My community partners had many questions about this class and the projects. Their questions showed misconceptions about the relationships between feminism and religious communities. In addition, these partners had never worked with a women's studies class before. It required me to build that first bridge myself."

Sari explained how students' preconceptions and experiences of feminism and/or religion are often an obstacle when beginning this project. She explained, "To be able to participate in the class and service-learning activities, my students must go out of their comfort zone in different ways. Some of them identify as coming from small towns in Indiana with little diversity. This class and project might be the first time for them speaking with (let alone interviewing) a Muslim woman, for example. Others identify as having previous hurtful encounters with religious institutions, and this project required them to, once again, step that boundary to listen and learn. Other students strongly identify with the religion and must struggle with applying women's studies/feminist concepts, critical thinking, or even asking questions of institutional practices that are dear to them." The community partners for this class are all dedicated people in their own faiths and projects, which means they are all very busy. Sari expressed gratitude that the community partners/leaders delegated some responsibilities to their congregation or student representatives. These representatives made the boundaries between the WGSS students and members of the congregations easier to break through.

As a student currently engaging in this project, I agree with Sari's statement about going out of our comfort zone. I am working with Purdue Hillel. Because I do not identify as Jewish, I feared offending the Jewish community members with questions. I was concerned that my questions might hinder establishing rapport with them, especially with student members. I chose to face this obstacle for the purpose of self-interest and research, so I asked the questions anyway. What I found was that when I asked the questions (even about political issues), my community partner was gracious and gave detailed explanations. Philip Schlossberg, the director of Purdue Hillel, was willing to tell his personal stories about growing up Jewish and how that structured him in a certain way and gave him a specific outlook on life,



values, and even the LGBTQ community. He stated his appreciation for my group's interest in examining Judaism. Schlossberg ended with: "I do not care who you date in your free time, whether you are gay, lesbian, transgender, etc. When you come into Hillel, I see you as a Jew (or not), and all I care about is where you are on your Jewish journey and where that takes you."

Sari does not see past experiences and comfort zone as issues, but as opportunities to grow. She said, "My teaching philosophy is emphasizing lifelong skills; so often the fruit of my class cannot be seen right away. However, difficult dialogues of difference are not only necessary in the classroom, but most importantly out there, in everyday lives, in professional worlds, and even in family settings."

Sari explained that she taught an Introduction to American Studies class that examined the connection between religion and American cultural practices. She got an email from a student a year later saying that her class had given her the skills to have interfaith dialogues with communities of faith (the student identified as an atheist). She appreciates messages like this. Sari continued, "Receiving an A grade is excellent, getting published is hard work, and surviving the semester is obviously a skill, but the ability to listen to people with different perspectives, to understand their positionality and the complexity of identities, and to offer knowledgeable praises and critiques to institutional practices will remain one's lifelong assessment and evaluation."

## Reflection and Conclusion

In the future, Sari would like to dialogue with community partners and students regarding how to further develop the service components of the service-learning projects. Currently, participant observation, research, and writing about community partners are the "service" projects. The absence of such collaborations between



Sari and WGSS280 students present a poster at the second annual Engagement and Service-Learning Summit held in March 2017.

women's studies classes and faith-based institutions in the past is important. As community partners and instructors establish the ground for trust and critical scholarly analysis, it is Sari's desire that the partnership move to think of practical and effective service activities. At some point, Sari also hopes to quantify the benefits of the projects. She understands that critical intercultural learning needs funding, and she hopes to garner interest from funding institutions and offices.

I believe what sets Sari aside from most of my professors is that her work is more of a lifestyle. Sari is working toward a degree that empowers beliefs and means something to her as a person, not just as a professor. Her work helps you identify yourself and your personal background. What Sari organizes is different because she doesn't want to create projects, but instead, she wants to create people who care. Instilling care as part of her student, department, and community endeavors is what fuels her projects.

Sari's focus on women and religion has excited interest in her students and among her colleagues. About a week prior to writing this article, I volunteered to promote



Purdue Hillel, located at 912 West State Street, West Lafayette, Indiana.

Sari's work to some of her colleagues at the second annual Engagement and Service-Learning Summit, and I noticed the inspiration that Sari's work had on almost every person who read our poster on feminism and religion. I am thankful for this opportunity to learn more about Sari and her work through this interview. I hope her work intrigues and educates you, as it did me.

### AUTHOR BIO SKETCH

**Keslee DiIorio** is a junior at Purdue University majoring in corporate communication with a minor in Spanish. She plans to pursue a career in event planning in a large city, such as Chicago, New York, or Los Angeles.

Following one year of work experience, she plans to attend graduate school for an MBA and then establish her own event planning company with a focus on weddings and engagements. DiIorio currently is enrolled in Pamela K. Sari's Introduction to Women's Studies course, working with Purdue Hillel for her service-learning project.

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